

Transfer Student Writing Guide

I. THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT

In MMW 4-6 you will develop an 8–10 page research paper on the topic outlined in the **Writing Assignment**. However, the process of writing this paper will occur in three parts: The Research Question and Annotated Bibliography (RQAB), the Prospectus, and the Final Paper. Each of these parts of the assignment is explained below.

Part 1: Research Question and Annotated Bibliography (RQAB)

The RQAB assignment has two essential components – the first is the development of your research question, and the second is the annotated bibliography.

1). The research question is the specific question that your paper will address. The writing assignment determines the parameters for the question, and the TA should discuss and explain it in section. Your paper must answer a research question that is approved by your TA. The criteria for approval are listed in detail on the Grading Checklist. You need a question that meets the specifics of the prompt and is narrow enough in scope to be managed in an 8-10 page paper. The question must be one that could be answered in more than one way; the core of your paper will be an argument supporting one of those answers.

MMW distinguishes four types or levels of questions:

- Level 1: Questions that can be answered with knowledge you have right now.
e.g. - When did Columbus make his first journey to the New World?
- Level 2: Questions that can be answered definitively with scholarly research.
When and how did the Roman Catholic Church determine that the pope is infallible on matters of faith and morals?
- Level 3: **Open-ended questions to which an answer can be proposed based on scholarly research, but that cannot be answered definitively.**
What factors most significantly caused the massacres of non-Christians during the establishment of the Crusader States in Palestine at the end of the 11th century?
- Level 4: Questions that cannot be addressed with scholarly research, either because of a lack of evidence or because they ask something that cannot be answered by citing evidence.
Was Cortes an incarnation of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl?

Appropriate research questions for MMW papers are **level 3 questions**. These are *questions for which arguments supported by evidence can be made for a particular answer, but to which there is no single correct answer*. What you will be attempting to find in your research is a scholarly debate which advances evidence and arguments for various responses to your research question, from which you will shape your **thesis** and **counterargument** (see “Prospectus” below).

In your RQAB assignment you should explain in a paragraph or two what the topic for your paper will be, including what time period and geographic area you think you will be focusing on, and you should state your research question explicitly.

2) The second part of the RQAB assignment is the **annotated bibliography (AB)**. The AB provides a full and correct bibliographic entry for each of your six sources (5 secondary, including one article from a scholarly journal, and one primary source) according to proper MLA format. For the MLA guidelines see the “MLA Documentation” section (pp. 155-204) in Ann Raimés’, *Keys for Writers (KW)*, and the **Model Research Question and Annotated Bibliography**. The AB also provides a 1-2 paragraph evaluation of each source in the context of your particular topic and research question. This should include a **summary of information provided by the source, a description of arguments made by the author that could contribute to forming responses to your research question, and an explanation of why the source seems as if it will be useful in the forming of your thesis or counterargument and the writing of your prospectus and paper.**

Sources

What you are looking for in evaluating sources is the quality of information presented on the topic and its suitability to your particular question. You want information and arguments from scholars that will lead to **debate** over the answer to your research question. **Books published by scholarly presses are best (University of Oxford Press, University of Chicago Press, etc.), and, usually, the more recent the publication the better.** Most scholarly journals are published by academic societies, such as the American Political Science Association or the American Historical Association, or by a university. If you need help finding sources, especially journal articles, ask a librarian, attend a library orientation at CLICS, or consult the MMW Library Research Tool at <http://clics.ucsd.edu/instruction/mmw/index.html>.

Question Approval

It is extremely rare that you will receive full approval of your research question when you first propose it. It is likely that you will need to continue to refine your question, change its focus, or perhaps even change your entire topic, before it meets the specific requirements of the prompt and is the kind of question that will produce a paper of 8-10 pages. Your graded RQAB should provide the jumping-off point for that refining process. The next official chance you will have to re-submit your question will be the Prospectus, but if you are unsure about how to proceed you should discuss the issues with your TA in section, in office hours, or (if encouraged by your TA) by e-mail while you work on your Prospectus. The sooner you get your question approved, the sooner you can confidently proceed on to the next phase: doing the focused research necessary to answer your question and formulating your answer (your **thesis**), developing your **counterargument**, and organizing your evidence.

Parts 2 and 3: Prospectus and Final Paper

The Prospectus is probably the most important, and often the most difficult, portion of the writing assignment. Its purpose is to begin organizing your research into the proper format, to begin formulating your thesis, counterargument, and rebuttal, and to begin planning how you will be using your sources to supply evidence along the way.

The Prospectus is essentially a plan for your final paper and contains, in paragraph form, all of the elements of the paper. Indeed, the **Grading Checklist** for the Prospectus is identical to that of the Final Paper. The **Writing Guidelines** should be kept in mind as you work on both, but first there are some issues specific to the transition from RQAB to Prospectus that you should be aware of:

Prospectus Worksheet

If you are having difficulty planning your prospectus there is a **Prospectus Worksheet** in this workbook specifically designed to help you. This worksheet is a very clear template to help you understand what information your prospectus should present.

Thesis/Counterargument/Alternative Hypothesis

Your research question should have more than one plausible answer. That means that you'll find scholars who provide different answers to the question you are asking. Some answers will be dramatically different from each other; in others, the differences will be more subtle. Your task will be to identify the **arguments** among scholars, to evaluate the evidence provided, and to decide which answer is strongest or most convincing to you. This will be the argument that supports your **thesis**.

A **counterargument** is an argument that supports an answer to your question that refutes your thesis— your answer to the question. An **alternative hypothesis** (you may also hear this term used) is simply an alternative answer to your research question. In your paper, you present a counterargument or alternative hypothesis (maybe more than one), which means that you must explain why and how the counterargument you present contradicts, or conflicts with, your own thesis. The thesis that you present will be your opinion as to the best answer to your research question, and the **counterargument/alternative hypothesis** will present another valid opinion supported by evidence. The counterargument is not just another possible answer; it is one that someone has or could make a reasonably strong argument for. The counterargument shows that you have considered opinions other than your own in the process of answering your question, and it engages scholars whose opinions may differ from your own.

Rebuttal

Because you are presenting another viable answer to your thesis in your paper, you must also include a rebuttal that explains how and why your thesis is superior or more convincing to the counterargument that you have presented. In your Prospectus you should explain specifically what you think your counterargument and rebuttal will be.

Explanation of Significance

MMW also requires that you explain the significance of your argument - *how it modifies or contributes to current thinking on the topic*. This does NOT mean that you have to offer an explanation of why it is important to write about your given topic (“it is important to write about the fall of Rome because it is important, and it still impacts our lives today”)... it is taken as a given that your topic is worth investigating, and a defense of it is either patronizingly obvious or plays the part of the “lady that doth protest too much.” What you need to explain is how your paper – whether it be by its unique angle of approaching the topic, the combination of sources and scholars that you have analyzed, the way you have used or interpreted the evidence, the creativity of your particular argument, etc. – makes a significant contribution to scholarship on the topic. Be confident! This is your chance to stake your claim as a scholar who has done good research! You may do this at the beginning of your paper, throughout your paper, and/or at the end of your paper. A convincing paper weaves its significance throughout.

Works Cited Page and Sources

For the Prospectus and Final Paper you must **convert your annotated bibliography into a Works Cited Page**. Your Works Cited Page lists the proper bibliographical information (according to MLA guidelines) for all of the sources that are cited in your Prospectus (and, later, in your paper). In order to count as sources and be included in your Works Cited Page you must **cite** each of your 6 sources somewhere in your prospectus (or Final Paper). Again, the proper format is outlined in *Keys for Writers (KW)*, and there is a **Model Works Cited Page** available on the website.

Note: The requirements for sources used in the Prospectus and Final Paper are the same as those cited in the Annotated Bibliography (see above), but as you will have developed your Research Question you may use

sources different from the ones you cited earlier. This is to be expected. You do NOT have to complete an annotated bibliography for new sources that were not in your RQAB.

II. PAPER WRITING GUIDELINES

One of the most common difficulties for transfer students is adjusting to the specific way in which the MMW program is asking them to write. The following is a list of guidelines for the construction of a scholarly essay, **based specifically on what we in MMW are asking you to do**. It is intended as a basic guide for planning, organizing, and formatting your writing.

The goal of the MMW writing program is to teach students to think and write critically and to be able to construct an original scholarly essay of the highest quality – something that is accessible and understandable to scholars in almost any academic setting. Your goal in writing it is to make an *argument* - convince the reader, with data and scholarly support, that your thesis is the best possible answer to the research question that you are investigating. The format may seem formulaic, but this is because it is necessary for people in a wide variety of disciplines to have a set of common expectations when they engage in scholarly dialogue and debate.

Overall paper organization

The two most common schemes for organizing papers are:

Scheme A

Intro. [Historical background, explanation of controversy/ research question, statement of thesis and counterargument]
Counterargument/Alternative hypotheses
Rebuttal of counterargument
Argument*
Conclusion (including reiteration of significance)

Scheme B

Intro. [Historical background, explanation of controversy/ research question, statement of thesis and counterargument]
Argument*
Counterargument
Rebuttal
Conclusion (including reiteration of Significance)

Note: Of course, these schemes are only models and may not suit every paper. Also, obviously, the different sections will not be given equal length or development.

*It may be helpful, if you have a relatively complicated thesis and argument or one that attempts to synthesize a number of different kinds of evidence, to include a paragraph before your “Argument” section that outlines those steps and explains how they all add up, a sort of mini-introduction specifically to your argument. (i.e. a summary of all of the “claims” that constitute your argument, all of which will be dealt with in individual paragraphs/sections of your argument section itself). This paragraph also serves as a natural transition between your Rebuttal and Argument (Scheme A) or your Introduction and Argument (Scheme B).

Outlining Your Argument

Once you have a question and a thesis, you should try to map out exactly how your essay is going to progress. You have a thesis and a lot of related data, but how to present it all? You need to determine what step-by-step claims you need to prove in order to build an argument for your thesis as a whole. Your thesis is an argument in favor of a particular answer to your research question, but that argument should have several logical steps, and it may require you to provide evidence that several different things were all happening in conjunction. Logic is your friend. You want to organize your data around small, manageable claims that can be individually supported by evidence and that work together to make the argument for your thesis as a whole. Each of these claims should be developed in its own paragraph, with the topic sentence of the paragraph being a statement of the claim.

Example:

Thesis.

- Claim 1 + (one paragraph)
- Claim 2 + (another paragraph)
- Claim 3 + (another paragraph)
- etc. . . . (other paragraphs as needed)

You need to make sure that you have included all parts of your thesis and that you have arranged the parts in a logical order. This will make transitions from paragraph to paragraph easy for you and clear to your reader. It will also provide the structure for the body of your paper as a whole.

Your **topic sentences** should introduce the claim that each paragraph will elucidate and should explain the relationship of that claim to your overall thesis argument, if it is not clear.

**Note: You should be able to pull out your topic sentences and get a reasonable summary of your entire paper (it is not a bad idea actually to do this as a test).*

**Constructing an argument is discussed on pp. 51-61 of Raimes, KW.*

Writing Main Paragraphs

If your overall organization is clear and sensible, each paragraph should be devoted to providing and explaining evidence. Break down and explain each claim, and supply the proper evidence (facts, quotations, interpretation of sources, etc.) to support each claim. Make sure all evidence is directly related to your claim and that you fully explain the connection (i.e. why or how the quotation or data that you cite supports the validity of your claim). It is okay to proceed according to a formulaic method of organization for your writing.

Example: Claim 1/ Topic sentence.

- Introduce evidence 1.
- Give evidence 1.
- Explain how evidence 1 proves claim 1.
- Introduce evidence 2.
- Give evidence 2.
- Explain how evidence 2 proves claim 1.
- (Rinse, Repeat.)

This approach makes a clear paragraph – evidence clearly related to and organized around your claim, which itself contributes to proving your thesis. For each paragraph, change claim and evidence; repeat the process through to the conclusion of the paper. The most common problem that students have with evidence is that evidence (a quotation, a set of facts, etc.) is cited but not explained. The other common problem is that they throw in extraneous evidence. The model above should help you avoid both of those issues

Counterargument and Rebuttal

Introduce the **counterargument** and explain why or how it counters your thesis argument. Provide evidence and explanation for the validity of the counterargument, just as you do for your own argument.

The stronger your counterargument appears, the stronger your argument will be when you rebut it. Do not be afraid to introduce the counterargument directly. i.e.: “It could be argued that...,” or “An alternative argument about [the topic] is that...,” or “[Scholar x] suggests a different answer to the question...”

A **rebuttal** directly address your counterargument, and explains how it is flawed or problematic. Give evidence as to why it is flawed, and explain why the evidence proves your claim. (This explanation will often take the form of a critique of the evidence used to support the counterargument.). Explain why your thesis argument is better and why it fixes the “problems” that the counterargument has.

Your rebuttal does not necessarily have to show that the counterargument is “wrong” – you can make the case that your argument is superior or more convincing despite the fact that the counterargument has merit. Arguments for rebuttal could include:

- that your research has considered different evidence that leads to a different and better answer to the question than the counterargument;
- that your argument relies on the work of better scholars than the counterargument does;
- that you combine or synthesize a number of viewpoints, while the counterargument represents only one view;
- that you approach the data from a different viewpoint, etc.

***Other ideas and tips for organizing paragraphs, arguments, and rebuttals are on pp. 27-36 and pp. 61-70 of KW, which provides models.*